GOD'S CURIOUS CHOICES

May 7, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 1:14-20

"You did not choose me, but I chose you..."
John 15:16 (RSV)

In all of history was there ever a more momentous exchange than that? In the entire sweep of the human enterprise has there ever been a more fateful encounter than the one between the carpenter from Nazareth and the fishermen working their nets along the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

"Follow me..." he said.

"And immediately they left their nets and followed him."

Just like that. Just like that the history of the world was irrevocably and profoundly changed. But don't you wish the writers of the ancient accounts had been a little more generous with details, at least a little background material? Surely he didn't just happen to be strolling beside the sea and, seeing them throwing their nets out into the surf, impulsively decide to say "follow me"! Surely they didn't actually do what the text says they did... "immediately left their nets and followed him."

Of all the texts in the Bible with which I have argued over the years, this is the most tenacious. Granted, this was no ordinary exchange... This was not a friend calling and asking if you want to take the afternoon off and go to Wrigley Field. This was the Son of God asking four men whose names would be uttered in reverence by millions forever after - Peter, Andrew, James, John - asking them to join him in redeeming the world. But the clear fact is that they didn't know this at the time. They didn't know who he was or what the future would hold. Three years later, after following him all over the countryside, they still don't know. And so discount the possibility that they weighed the options, reviewed their life goals, and concluded that being one of the twelve was worth the awkwardness and embarrassment and sacrifice which most certainly occurred when they laid those nets down and walked away.

The trouble with this whole matter is that deciding what to do when we grow up... is a rather major matter for all of us, regardless of who we

are and where we are on what we have learned to call our "career path." So when we hear a story about a group of men in their late twenties, doing an abrupt about face, walking away from the safety and security of the job they know how to do - the occupation which, while not exciting, nevertheless offers other advantages like a regular paycheck - we are inclined to sit up and take notice. The fact is few of us have ever heard anything about our vocation, our future choices, that even approaches that directness and clarity, or that elicited so dramatic a response. And so let me bring to this discussion an older story which, it has always seemed to me, is told in a way that acknowledges, rather eloquently, the concerns we have about vocation. The story of Moses - God's call to Moses - Moses' response to God.

The story is a wonderful one. You can find it in the third and fourth chapters of the Book of Exodus. You may recall the preface: Moses is saved, as an infant, from the paranoid genocide of the Pharaoh by being placed in a basket in the bullrushes, is rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, grows up in the royal court, kills an Egyptian, is a refugee, marries and settles down, has a son, goes into business with his father-in-law. And then one day he sees a burning bush in the desert and hears a voice that says "I have heard the cry of my people in Egypt... Come I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people." To which Moses says, with considerable understatement, but with absolute clarity, "Who, me?"

"Who am I that I should go?" and there begins the kind of dialogue between Moses and God that you and I can understand... It is a lot less dramatic than the disciples' immediate decision, but it is much more human.

"Who me?" asks Moses. "I'm not qualified for that." "I'll go with you," God says...

"What if I go; what will I say to them? I'm not a theologian... I'm not even very religious." And God says "Tell them 'I Am' sent you."

And Moses says, "If I say that, they won't believe me." And God says "I'll help you."

And Moses says "But I'm not eloquent... as a matter of fact I'm a lousy public speaker." And God: "I will teach you what to say."

Finally, having exhausted all the reasons he can think of for not going Moses puts it as clearly as anyone could, without adornment or rationale: "Oh my Lord, send, I pray, some other person."

Now I don't know about you, but preceding most of the interesting things I've ever done, I engaged in something like that dialogue. If it was not with God, at least with the person on the other end of the telephone asking me to do a job I didn't think I could do, and therefore didn't think I wanted to do.

"Why me? I don't know how to do it - I'm not qualified. I don't have any experience. And - how about Joe, or Sally - Oh, my Lord - send some other person."

You see, we have not ever been able to shake the notion that God has something to do with who we are and where we are and what we are to do with our lives. We have not been able to think about the matter of our vocation without some sense that something, someone is part of the dynamic - pushing, prodding, stirring us up, showing us tantalizing possibilities, opening a door here, slamming a door there. We have not been able to avoid the mysterious possibility that God has something in mind for us and that God's coming to us in Jesus Christ is in some way a summons to our vocation - a calling to become what God means for us to become.

John Updike keeps writing about things like that with considerable beauty, I think. In his latest book, Self Consciousness, which is a kind of personal memoir, he writes about spending an evening walking the streets of the small Pennsylvania town where he grew up... about the school and five and dime store, the fabulously fat policeman, the luncheonette, the people and the houses... the town where he was secure "in the belief that I was known, watched, placed."

As he walks the dark streets Updike invokes the German word which lies at the heart of philosophy - "Dasein... the first mystery that confronts us is "why me?" The next is "why here?" Haven't you asked that? "Why me? Why here?" [p.6] And then at the end he provides a kind of answer which I found both provocative and moving.

"Dasein (why me - why here?)... Isn't it a miracle, the oddity of consciousness being placed in one body rather than another, in one place and not somewhere else, in one handful of decades rather than in ancient Egypt, or ninth-century Wessex, or Samoa before the missionaries came, or Bulgaria under the Turkish Yoke, or the Ob River Valley in the days of the wooly mammoths? Billions of consciousnesses silt history full and every one of them the center of the universe. What can we do in the face of this unthinkable truth but scream or take refuge in God?" [p. 40]

So we take refuge... from the beginning our stories tell us that God has a part in who we are, where we are and what we become. God makes choices... God meant for it to be Moses... chose him for a set of reasons. Peter and Andrew, James and John are not simply the first four men Jesus meets on the day he decides to recruit disciples... They are intended by God, gifted by God in ways they don't even understand, particularly skilled to do work they don't begin to comprehend.

God, that is to say, makes choices and they are sometimes very curious.

But first, the very idea of God choosing has given us a lot of trouble. The theological name for the notion is the Doctrine of Election. God chose a nation through whose history God's very self would be revealed to the rest of the world. That's a puzzle. "How odd of God to choose the Jews" is a favorite Old Testament limerick. Why not the Egyptians... admirable people and monotheists at that? Why not Greece or Rome? Why Israel? And God chooses to come into history in the life of a carpenter from Nazareth... Why not a General, or a King, or at least a great philosopher like Socrates? God chooses the foolish, said Paul, the weak

and non-descript. And concludes almost everyone in history who ever thought about it much, God must have chosen me... Or else, how did I come to be here in this place at this time? The doctrine of election always starts out as a way to testify, with enormous humility, that I am here, I am in the community of faith; I can do what I can do, because someone has been giving me gifts, leading me, enabling me, helping me to believe and have being, providing timely courage and strength. Election starts out - always - as a way to point to God's mysterious grace, in the life of an individual, a theological way of affirming God and not self-merit.

Shortly after the Christian Church got going, it adopted a very peculiar idea; namely that there were two kinds of Christians - clergy and lay people. It adopted that notion because the world in which it lived loved to set up dichotomies like that, dualities: light and darkness, body and spirit, sacred and secular. It got that notion, not from Jesus, but from the Greek philosophers. In any event, it wasn't long before the young church had a full-fledged caste system: clergy and laity. Clergy live in the world of the spirit, the church. Laity live in the other, real world.

It may have been the worst mistake we ever made. Because it wasn't very long until we compounded it with an even worse error. Namely, the notion that God chooses the clergy to be clergy, but leaves every other person up to his/her own wits to decide what to do. Vocation became calling to priesthood. It took more than a thousand years to undo the damage and we are still trying to deal with it.

"We are all priests" said John Calvin and Martin Luther. And by that they did not mean that you don't need a priest to intercede with God - the traditional, belligerent Protestant battle cry. What they meant is something far more important; namely, that every man and woman is called by God to ministry... not just the professional clergy, but ministry in the broader sense of doing God's work. Every life has meaning, and significant and important work to do. There is no such thing as a sacred as opposed to a secular vocation.

The radical Protestant principal is that God's work is done when faithful people do the world's work with mercy and justice and dedication and love. Building walls, washing clothes, arguing cases, performing surgery, selling stocks, taking blood, having babies, playing a violin, teaching children, fighting fires, negotiating contracts, flying airplanes... and preaching sermons.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote: "We are all asked to do more than we can do. Every hero and heroine of the Bible does more than he would have thought possible to do from Gideon to Esther to Mary." [Walking on Water, p. 6] None of them were qualified... it would appear.

Curious choices. Morton Kelsey has written about why Jesus chose fishermen instead of lawyers or architects. He suggests that it wasn't a bad decision at all when you consider the patience, dedication, and stubbornness which you have to have to fish with any success. And their age - young people, all of them, probably late twenties. Kelsey writes: "speaking as one in his late sixties, I know that I have learned much in

the last 25 years but I have also realized that there is a dedication, energy and power in young men and women... Would Christianity have spread, had most of Jesus' disciples been in their sixties?" [Resurrection, p. 122]

Think of how many of the wonderfully gifted seem at first totally unequipped to do what they do brilliantly... Jim Abbott pitching magnificently with no right hand... Beethoven writing the passionate Ninth Symphony as deafness closes in... Van Gogh painting sunflowers while descending into the dark night of the soul.

How do you and I know what to do, where to go... what God wants us to become? For some people it comes dramatically... a man walks by and says "follow me." Sometimes it is a voice in the dark, a burning bush, a close brush with death. For some, says Fred Buechner, it begins with a lump in the throat or a tear in the eye.

And, for others it is a matter of simply and honestly surveying the gifts you have been given and asking a most simple question: "To what purpose should I be putting the gifts God has given me?"

And for others it is a matter of responding to the insistent voices - sometimes, frequently in fact, contained in the cries of pain and anguish that haunt us in the night: the cries of the hungry, and homeless, and sick and oppressed. God calls us, I do believe, through our own uneasy conscience, our own passion for justice - our own anger even, our impatience with structures of injustice in the world.

And God calls us through our love. God, I believe, uses our loves, our passions, our hopes, our dreams... God puts them in our hearts.

God's work is done, not just when people decide to become clergy, but when the world's work is done with mercy and love and dedication and justice.

What we actually believe is that God has chosen you, elected you, in Jesus Christ called you. You are a chosen one. We say that in a universal sense, in a way that exceeds our ability to comprehend. But also in a very personal sense. God calls you to ministry.

It is a matter of very great importance to each one of us to listen, to know and to respond. For, in the final analysis it is our own identity that is at stake. God can probably find someone else to do our work. In fact, finding substitutes to do the work people refuse to do is probably one of God's major activities. What is really at stake is us: the meaning and purpose of our lives, our joy, our love, our fulfillment, our peace at the end of the day...

In his journal for May 6, 1854, Thoreau wrote -

"All that a man (or woman) has to say or do that can possibly concern mankind, is in some shape or other to tell the story of his love,... to sing, and if he is fortunate and keeps alive, he will be forever in love. This alone is to be alive..."

That's what is at stake. It is both the invitation and the promise of discipleship... At the beginning of the story Jesus chooses people and calls them to follow. And at the end, at the table of the Last Supper, he says it again: "You did not choose me. I chose you."

You may not always see it clearly, as they did not. The voice may not be terribly loud and distinct. And you may find yourself arguing with it a lot - in ways you'd be too embarrassed to discuss with anyone. But God means for there to be a you...

God has something in mind.

God has tasks which you are uniquely equipped to do... And therefore there is a reason for your being.

God has chosen you... a curious choice perhaps, but we do believe that. In Jesus Christ God has called you.

The adventure starts when you lay down nets and follow; when you say "here I am, send me..." when in some way or another you say yes to the voice of God calling your name.

Amen.